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## Coming Back Across the Fence: Masculinity and the Transition to Sustainable Agriculture\*

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**ABSTRACT** In this paper we explore the social construction of agricultural masculinity and its role in the transition to sustainable agriculture. We draw our evidence from a participatory qualitative study comparing members of the sustainable agriculture group Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) with their non-PFI neighbors. On the non-PFI farms, men more often represented what we call *monologic masculinity*, a conventional masculinity with rigid and polarized gender expectations and strictly negotiated performances that make a clear distinction between men's and women's activities. The male farmers belonging to PFI, on the other hand, more often represented what we call *dialogic masculinity*, characterized by different measures for work and success than in monologic masculinity, less need for control over nature, and greater social openness. Although both are present to some extent in all male participants, we argue that acceptance of a more dialogic masculinity helps promote the transition to sustainable agriculture.

It's a typical late-spring morning in the Iowa heartland. The forecast is for the high sixties and sunshine, a welcome break from the rain of the last two weeks. Snapping off the weather channel, Kyle Jenson<sup>1</sup> heads out the kitchen door, straps on his boots, and hurriedly feeds and checks the hogs. With only a two-day window before the next rain, he is itching to fire up his John Deere 8780 tractor and set up his new no-till drill for planting soybeans in his back sixty, a field he and his father at one time plowed with horses.

Kyle's wife, Wendy, is already folding laundry, paying the bills, and planning for "dinner" (the midday meal for many rural

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in this article are pseudonyms. In addition, inessential farm characteristics and physical attributes have been changed to maintain strict confidentiality.

Iowans). She is also getting ready to go to work at her off-farm job in the afternoon, but she will wait to serve dinner and go to work until Kyle is ready to take a break. Knowing that Kyle will be hungry and tired when he comes back in, Wendy fixes a solid meal: pork-burgers, pork and beans, bread and butter, and milk to top it off. She is eager to hear how far he gets this morning, how wet the ground is, and how well the equipment is holding up. Now that the kids are grown, she worries about Kyle pushing to do all the planting by himself, often well past dark, stopping only for the one meal and to refill his planter with seed.

This spring scene plays out all over Iowa. The division of labor on the Iowa farm still largely follows gender lines: men do most of the outdoor work, and women support the men's hectic schedules by providing meals at odd hours, doing chores, running the household, going out for tractor parts, and working off-farm jobs—not to mention taking care of the children and anything else the men do not have time to do. But although women play an integral role in Iowa agriculture, it is the men who most often claim, and are ascribed, the identity of "farmer."

Beginning in 1995, we set out to understand the social conditions of sustainable agriculture in Iowa through a participatory qualitative study of farm households that belong to Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), Iowa's principal sustainable agriculture group, and their non-PFI neighbors.<sup>2</sup> In this paper we report on one dimension of these conditions: the connection between ideologies of masculinity and the transition to sustainable agriculture. We argue that the conventional masculinity of most male farmers hinders the transition from industrial to sustainable agriculture. Moreover, the success of the sustainable agriculture movement depends, in part, on providing a social arena in which men may discover and perform different masculinities.

Kyle Jenson's masculine performance, as described above, represents what we call *monologic masculinity*, a conventional masculinity with rigid expectations and strictly negotiated performances that provide a clear distinction between men's and women's work. Monologic masculinity also limits the range of topics deemed appropriate to discuss, mandates a specific definition of work and success, and sets precise boundaries of manhood.

A different scenario, however, is becoming more prevalent in Iowa among male PFI farmers: what we call *dialogic masculinity*, a broader understanding of what it is to be a man. Dialogic masculinity is more open to talking about making mistakes, to expressing emotions, to change and criticism, to a less controlling attitude toward machines and the environment, and to different measures of work and success.

<sup>2</sup> The results of the full study can be found in Bell et al. (in preparation).

The distinction between monologic and dialogic masculinity is a heuristic device, not a dualism. There is no rigid boundary between the two; they are what Max Weber ([1918] 1978) once called "ideal types." Kyle Jenson is not purely monologic; no one is. Each male farmer experiences a constant tension between monologic and dialogic masculinity. Overall, however, the farmers in our study who practice industrial agriculture (capital-intensive, with low commitment to management, environment, and community) exhibited a more monologic masculinity, while farmers who lean more toward sustainability (less capital-intensive, with higher commitment to management, environment, and community) exhibited a more dialogic masculinity. This notion in itself is dialogic: not only does sustainable ideology lead to more dialogic masculinity, but dialogic masculine identities are drawn more toward sustainable practices.<sup>3</sup>

Ideas of masculinity are associated closely with ideas of femininity, and one might reasonably ask why we emphasize masculinity in this article. Isn't everything already about men?

Perhaps our first answer to this important question is that, given this close association, we could not have conducted this research if there were not already studies of rural and farm *women* (Barlett 1993; Brandth 1994; Chiappe and Flora 1998; Fink 1987; Knobloch 1996; Meares 1997; Wright 1995, among others). We are grateful to previous researchers for creating a space for this study of masculinities in agriculture. Moreover, our research is not simply a study of *men*; gender is socially organized, socially constructed, and negotiated in everyday interaction, and therefore involves both women and men (Connell 1995; Kessler and McKenna 1978). As Brandth (1994:130) comments, "Femininity exists only in relation to masculinity and vice versa." To study masculinity is to study a central factor in the lives of both rural men and rural women. We also offer some analytic tools necessary for critiquing the current expressions of masculinity in agriculture.

### **Masculinities in Agri/Culture**

There is not one masculinity in agriculture (nor in any other field of human endeavor), but *masculinities*. As most researchers in the sociology of masculinity agree, and as Connell (1995) argues perhaps most forcefully, masculinity is a social construction and therefore a product of the multiplicity of social contexts and structures that do the constructing. Masculinity, then, is not a fixed quotient, an unalterable fact of maleness. It is as variable as social life itself.

One prominent strand of social variability, suggested by Russian social theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986), is the distinction be-

<sup>3</sup>For further discussion of our distinctions between industrial and sustainable agriculture, see Bell et al. (in preparation).

tween *monologic* and *dialogic* social conditions. In the former, we speak and act without acknowledging others—their words, their wishes, indeed sometimes their very presence—in anything more than a superficial and objectified way. We conceive the world as divided along precise, rigid, and generally hierarchical boundaries, with atomistic actors and discrete categories. In dialogic conditions, however, social actors seek to *take each other into account*, as described by Bell (1998). We maintain an openness to the concerns and views of others; we envision our place in social life as an interactive part of the constantly changing whole; we regard our categories and language with a similarly open, interactive outlook.

Bakhtin recommends understanding the distinction between dialogue and monologue dialogically. Any one social situation is likely to contain elements of both, just as we, in our own lives, lean one way or the other, depending on our social histories, interactions, social structures, and cultures. Indeed, pure monologue is not possible. By the same token, pure dialogue is empirically unlikely and perhaps conceptually impossible; as Bakhtin suggests, however, a preponderance of monologue is regrettably more common.

In other words, Bakhtin's work has an explicitly normative dimension: he thinks monologue is bad. Thus his approach fits into a style of theory we might term *moral postmodernism*: social theory that abandons the modernist faith in the possibility of, and the necessity for, a separation of social science and values. Sociologists increasingly have written about the need for this abandonment (Levine 1995; Seidman 1994), including contributors to *Rural Sociology* (Bell 1995; Warner and England 1995); this trend accounts in part for the increasing popularity of a Bakhtinian approach.

We extend Bakhtin's work here as a heuristic device for understanding the culture of masculinity—or, more precisely, the cultures of masculinities—in agriculture. Social life has its monologic and its dialogic side; so does masculinity. We are not claiming that the distinction between monologic and dialogic masculinity describes all features of masculinities. Our fieldwork, however, suggests that this distinction describes much of the difference in the masculine ideologies of more industrially inclined and more sustainably inclined farmers in Iowa. The sustainable agriculture movement is strongly dialogic not only in the social conditions it promotes but also in the social lives of those attracted to it. It emphasizes a less individualistic, less categorical, less homogeneous approach to farming, and thus a more interactive, more holistic outlook. This movement also is more open to change and therefore is not (or not necessarily) a new functionalism. At least in its rhetoric, sustainable agriculture emphasizes a way of farming that attends to, and takes into account, the needs of others in society and of the physical environment.

The sustainable agriculture movement consequently provides farm men with an arena for discovering and performing a more dialogic masculinity. As suggested by Goffman (1959, 1979) and Butler (1993), gender is a performance that requires an audience and the assistance of other persons on and off stage. Kimmel (1996) points out that a characteristic feature of masculinity is what he calls the commonly *homosocial* context of its performance. That is, men frequently direct their masculine performances with other men in mind. Masculinity also may be what, in parallel, we term *heterosocial*: performed with an audience of women in mind. It also may be both, in varying degrees. In any event, as Chodorow (1978) argues, men in both their homosocial and their heterosocial performances typically conceive masculinity as not-feminine, a categorical opposition we regard as culturally monologic.

Although we found the metaphor of performance a useful analytic device, an exclusive focus on the performers potentially obscures the social structures and power relations involved in the drama of social life (as many have complained of a Goffmanesque analysis).<sup>4</sup> Performances generally involve other players, stage hands, and an audience, who may not be involved in the performance of masculinity. The masculine actor is often the script writer and the theater paymaster as well; this situation ensures a production that meets his performance standards.

In addition, the masculine actor himself may not perform altogether willingly; he rarely has complete control of the script or of the theater payroll. *Structures of performance* shape every social act. Farming is a notoriously uncertain source of livelihood and thus of social identity. Farm men often find that their financial worth and their sense of self-worth hang in precarious balance. Consequently, masculinities in agri/culture entail a constant struggle to perform, regardless of whether men conceive masculinity in more monological or more dialogical terms. Sustainable agriculture may lead to more dialogic masculinities (and vice versa), but in the face of the uncertainties of agriculture, even the most dialogic farm men unfortunately may be tempted at times to draw on monologic masculinity.

### Setting and Methods

Qualitative research methodologies recently have drawn considerable criticism for commonly using top-down approaches, in which the academic researcher is the sole authority behind the representation of the evidence (Clifford 1986; Clough 1992; Van Maanan 1988). It has also been argued that a detached mode of research

<sup>4</sup> We are indebted to Jacqueline Litt, our colleague at Iowa State University, for this observation. A recommended resource on this issue is Reynolds (1990:ch. 9).

leads to a sociology which is less relevant to the concerns of society (Bell 1998). In response to these critiques, many methodologists are calling for more reflexive and more participatory approaches that involve the researched in the process of research; such approaches benefit by the perspectives of persons both inside and outside the research subject (Bell 1998; Gaventa 1993).

With these critiques in mind, we conducted our fieldwork with a four-person team composed of both "insiders" and "outsiders." Each member of the research team brought to the project a different level of familiarity with Iowa, with agriculture, and with PFI. Both Jarnagin and Bauer have long associations with PFI, Jarnagin as the spouse of a PFI founder and long-time PFI employee, and Bauer as a PFI board member and farmer. Bell and Peter were relative newcomers to agriculture and rural life in Iowa.

PFI emerged in 1985 in the midst of the 1980s farm crisis, and since that time has developed into Iowa's principal farmer-based organization for sustainable agriculture. Membership currently stands at roughly 250 farms, plus about 250 nonvoting nonfarm members. A distinctive and pioneering feature of the group is its focus on "on-farm research," in which farmers conduct their own scientific trials, often in collaboration with university researchers. PFI sponsors annual field days at member farms that participate in the trials; these events have been an important means of promoting sustainable agriculture in Iowa as well as in the state's universities. PFI provides the organizational structure for the exchange of information through regional and statewide meetings, a quarterly newsletter, and a network connecting sustainable farmers throughout the state. Another distinctive feature of PFI is its "Shared Visions" project; this and other projects have promoted local community-building efforts connecting sustainable farms with one another and with other residents across Iowa.

As a team, we conducted taped interviews with 35 PFI households and 34 non-PFI households, for a total of 108 individuals. Most of the initial interviews were conducted in spring and summer 1996. (Follow-up interviewing and participation with farmers continue today.) We often asked to interview both men and women together in their house, although sometimes gatekeeping limited the interview to a dyad. Every participant also gave us a farm tour, which sometimes developed into a tour of the neighborhood or community.

In the interviews, which ranged in length from 1 to 5½ hours, we used what we call *co-structured* procedures—that is, open not only to the directions the researchers wanted to take but also to the directions desired by the participants. This participatory technique increased the likelihood that the content of our interviews reflected more than the our own preconceptions. Because the traditional roles of researcher and respondent were broken down, participants

often felt comfortable enough to probe us for answers to their own questions, such as whether we grew up on a farm, why we were doing this anyway, and what other farmers had said so far.

Beyond the taped interviews, we came to know the farm households in more informal ways through farm stays of varying lengths. We ironed, cooked, ran errands, bought groceries, and critiqued antiques. We helped bale hay, plant beans, slaughter chickens, fix refrigerators, repair jammed augers, fix planter wheels, feed horses, and chase down escaped livestock. We ate meals, watched television, took care of children, played tunes on the fiddle, shot basketballs, visited neighbors, and sometimes spent the night on participating farms. We also regularly attended the meetings and field days of PFI. These participatory methods of research, systematically recorded through field notes, have been invaluable in providing the context for the information gathered in taped interviews, and for giving us further opportunity to share the structuring of the research process with the participants. We have also presented our preliminary findings to the PFI board and in follow-up discussions with PFI and non-PFI participants.

Iowa is a particularly important place for studying the transition to sustainable agriculture. It contains more prime agricultural soil than any other state and has the highest percentage of land under cultivation. First the plow, then mechanization, then hybrid seed corn transformed the prairie into this prime agricultural landscape, and then into a highly industrialized, commercialized, internationally recognized commodity. Agriculture is Iowa's principal industry and primary source of regional identity, as suggested by the current state slogan: "Iowa, Fields of Opportunities." To maximize industrial fields of opportunity in Iowa, farmers removed most of the historical fence rows. Yet a metaphorical fence was constructed in their place—a fence that still separates farm families from their neighbors. Monologue is the fence. If sustainable agriculture is to have an impact on farming, it must succeed here on the home front of agricultural industrialization—and of conventional agricultural masculinity.

### **The Gendered Landscape of Iowa Agriculture**

As we stated earlier, the division of labor in Iowa farm households still largely follows traditional gender lines. Despite the increasing numbers of farm women with off-farm jobs, women remain principally responsible for the indoor, reproductive labor of running a home, as do women in the paid labor force across the country. Arlie Hochschild (1989), in her study of housework in urban California, called indoor reproductive labor the "second shift." One PFI woman, Kathy, who has an off-farm professional career, had recently read Hochschild's book (at our suggestion). She concluded

that many farm women face not a second shift but a "third shift" in their homes. That is, they have responsibilities on the farm, in addition to those in the home and at their off-farm jobs. Many rural Iowa women also work a fourth shift as well: community and church.

Whether it is their second, third, or fourth shift, many women in our study felt some resentment about their male partners' lack of involvement in housework. Shelly and Richard, for example, a younger non-PFI couple, operate a 65-head dairy farm. Mike was visiting in the kitchen with Shelly while Richard finished up some chores on the farm. As they chatted, Shelly began to apply cold cream to her hands. Mike mentioned that dryness of the hands seemed to be a more common problem for women than for men. Shelly disagreed, saying, "But my husband, he's outdoors all the time. His hands don't get dry anywhere near so much."

Puzzled by her disagreement, Mike replied, "Well, yeah, that's my point. That's what I mean."

Shelly gave Mike a pointed look and said, "And he doesn't do any of the dishes either."

Mike eventually understood Shelly's argument: the relative dryness of her hands as compared with her husband's had nothing to do with *biological* differences between women and men. Even though her husband worked outside more, his hands did not get as dry as hers because he never did the dishes. And Shelly's dislike of that fact led to her very sociological critique of Mike's carelessly essentialistic small talk.

The ability of some Iowa farm men to resist sharing shifts, although many farm women wish men would take on more of these tasks, is a demonstration that patriarchy is alive and well in the social structure and culture of rural Iowa. These patterns of social power remain evident in Iowa farm households and in the objections of women such as Shelley and Kathy. The fact that Iowa farm men feel compelled to remain outside, working late into the night, indicates the systematic character of rural patriarchy that leads to particular conceptions of the masculine self; some farm men, however, resist these conceptions more strongly than others.

### **Language**

As in other male-dominated professions, the language of agriculture is highly gendered. We consistently heard both male and female farmers in Iowa using gendered terminology when discussing agriculture. Danny, a recent Iowa State University graduate in agronomy and a non-PFI farmer, is comfortable using this kind of language. Danny farms with his father, Dan senior, growing hundreds of acres of corn for a seed company. His mother, Sarah, doesn't consider herself a farmer but is actively involved in "the busi-



ness." Greg interviewed Danny, who still dressed like a college student; Dan senior, wearing work overalls and a feed cap; and Sarah, wearing dress slacks and a blouse, in their newly remodeled farm kitchen. They talked a bit about family and student life; Greg then asked Danny to describe the difference between "conventional" and "sustainable" agriculture. Danny replied, "Conventional farming to me is you take that plow out there and black her up. Like over there in that field [pointing to a field recently plowed by a seed company]. You black her up and you know that's the way it was done maybe thirty to forty years ago." The pronouns used by Danny refer to the land as female and as something you control: "You black *her* up." His father agreed and continued the line of thought: "Seed companies are out there for their own self and they don't care who they rape, including the land." To these men, then, there are farmers who "rape" the earth, and there are those who treat the land the way "she" should be treated. But although Sarah participated in the rest of the interview, she did not use the same language as Danny and Dan senior. We found that women generally refrained from using this kind of language.

Kay and Jerry, an older non-PFI couple, followed a similar pattern when Sue interviewed them at the small place they have farmed for many years. Sue asked Jerry why he liked to farm, a question he immediately warmed to. "I've done a great many things in my years," he said, "but I've always left one foot solidly on the ground as a farmer. As I've said once before, all things come from the ground. So if all [other] things go sour, we can live off the land."

Kay also warmed to the topic (although she later told Sue that she does not consider herself a farmer). "A real farmer," said Kay, "can't wait to get out in spring to turn that ol' sod and smell that soil, just like a gardener."

Jerry took up the answer again, but with a significant shift of metaphor: "It gives you a feeling that you're going to impregnate this earth, and I'm going to harvest it next fall."

Impregnating and raping a female land are metaphors that culturally support male dominance in agriculture. But not only is the land female, and often controlled violently; the "farmer" is male. Donna asked Dave, a PFI farmer in his forties who operates a small and economically struggling farm, "When you look around your community, what do you see as the good farmer? Do you see someone that you kind of hold up as 'that's a good farmer'?"

"That's an interesting question," Dave replied. "He raises good crops. If his crops look good, he's [good]. I'm always impressed with big machinery. . . . If I see a guy with a new combine, a new tractor, I say, 'Boy, he must be . . .' That kind of impresses me."

For Dave, the good farmer is a "he"—and not just any "he" but "a guy" "with big machinery," perhaps in unconscious recognition

of a latent sexual connotation in the size of one's farm equipment. The appearance of a farm is thus the appearance of masculine identity, an identity laid bare.

Although women in the study did not use gendered imagery to describe farm practices, they typically used gendered categories of farming identity. We often asked the couples we interviewed whether the woman on the farm was a "farmer." Yet despite their extensive participation in agricultural production, few women considered themselves "farmers" or were considered "farmers" by men. (This was the case both when we interviewed couples jointly and when each participant was interviewed separately.) Diana, for example, puts in some 20 hours a week, and sometimes more, working with her husband on their farm. Mike asked whether she would consider herself a farmer.

"I wouldn't mind it," Diana replied. "I just don't consider that I do enough farm work to be a farmer."

"Part-time farmer?" Mike asked.

"Part-time farmer, I suppose. But once again Frank's in charge. He's the farmer. I'm the helper. I'm the homemaker and farm hand."

Through interviews, farm stays, and return visits, we discovered that in Iowa most farm women "help" on the farm, just as some men "help" in the home. Thus the category of "farmer" remains the exclusive domain of men's work, not only in the eyes of the community but within the family as well.

### **A Man's Work**

We now move from the social construction of the farmer as male to describe the performance of monologic and dialogic agricultural masculinities. Ideologies of work are central to these dramatics.

#### **Dirt and Denial**

Greg was introduced to these work ideologies early one spring morning by Leonard, an older non-PFI farmer with a small hog confinement operation. Planning for a tour of Leonard's farm plus some hands-on farming experience, Greg came dressed in clean but faded jeans, a T-shirt, work boots, and an Iowa State University baseball cap. Leonard, dressed in work overalls and a well-worn seed cap, evidently regarded Greg's appearance as too scrubbed and collegiate for a farmer—or so we interpret the dramatics that followed.

The tour eventually led to the farrowing house. After showing Greg the feeding equipment, Leonard walked over to the manure pit, unzipped, and urinated into the pit. "Being a farmer, I'm more comfortable pissin' out here than inside," he told Greg, and nodded back toward the house.

Later, when they entered another part of the building, Leonard yelled "Pigs out!" A mother sow had knocked open the door on her confinement pen, allowing six piglets to escape. They fell into the manure pit below, and Leonard jumped into action.

Partly out of a concern for the animals and partly to create a favorable impression, Greg jumped in with him. Greg's job was to grab the manure-spattered blade of a spade and poke the wooden handle down through the steel grating to corral the drowning piglets and steer them over to the side of the pit, where Leonard had ready a little wire lasso attached to a stick. Leonard snagged a piglet's leg with the lasso, hauled it squealing onto the concrete floor, and then went back down for another.

Two of the six piglets survived the ordeal. Leonard looked approvingly at Greg, who was properly soiled; and after a futile attempt at washing up a bit with a hose, Leonard offered him a ride in his truck to see the rest of his farm. (Previously Leonard had not planned to give Greg the whole tour of the farm.) In the truck he told Greg that "a guy can't be afraid of getting dirty."

These performances by both Leonard and Greg were homosocial statements of the sharply bounded monologic masculinity we often encountered in the fieldwork. Several cultural oppositions underlay their performance: dirtiness versus cleanliness, outside versus inside, danger versus safety, farmer versus nonfarmer, and male versus female. Greg initially seemed to play the counterrole of the less masculine man who, through a rite of passage successfully performed, eventually crossed the boundary into manly manhood. He became a man among men who are not afraid of getting dirty, of relieving themselves outdoors, or of performing dangerous and unpleasant tasks.

This ascetic denial of bodily comfort defines not only the monologic male's view of himself but also his view of others. Greg and Leonard enacted this denial of the other homosocially, but farmers in our study also enacted it in heterosocial situations. Ron, a younger non-PFI farmer, manages thousands of acres and is well known in his community for his huge tractors, 60-foot-wide planter, and punishing work schedule. He seemed to take some pride in telling Donna, in an interview with him and his wife, Nancy, how during planting season he and his hired crew of men work "around the clock."

Donna asked, "So does that mean one person puts in a shift of 10 hours?"

"No," Ron replied. "It means one person puts in a shift of about 48 hours."

"Go till you drop?" Donna offered.

"Pretty much," he said, laughing. "We just hope when (you drop) you hit your head, and it brings you around so you can get back up and go some more."

It seemed to Donna that Ron had used this line before (perhaps also in the presence of men). With this statement, Ron presents the heterosocial image of a manly man who relishes hard work and is able to deny bodily need for comfort—and is also monologically capable of denying the comfort of others.

Monologic ascetic denial also involves not eating while working. While helping non-PFI farmers, both Mike and Greg participated in this approach to work: long periods on the tractor or the combine without food or drink. They were being culturally introduced to the manly world of “hard work.” As proudly proclaimed in an agricultural television advertisement aired in Iowa in autumn 1997, “Farmers invented hard work.” Most male farmers in our study, PFI and non-PFI alike, relished this image and its accompanying rituals.

Male PFI farmers, however, more frequently enacted dialogic moderation and concern for the comfort of others in work situations. One afternoon Greg was riding on the wheel well of a 1967 John Deere tractor, cultivating soybeans with John, a younger PFI farmer with a small farm. They had been out already for a few hours when John asked, “What’s your time frame like?” (wanting to know whether Greg had to be anywhere else). It was only 5:30 p.m., and Greg actually had to go home to his family, but he remained monologically noncommittal. John said, “I tell you what, Greg, I need to go home and get something to eat. I really haven’t eaten that much today.” On the surface there is nothing surprising about such a comment, but it illustrates the communal orientation of dialogic masculinity: a greater concern about the needs and feelings of others, such as being hungry and dead tired.

### **Controlling Nature**

Farm men’s fascination with big machines that control the environment is a well-known aspect of rural culture. Indeed, as Brandth (1994:131) observes, “The masculinization of farming became particularly marked after the mechanization of agriculture.” Male farmers do the overwhelming majority of outdoor fieldwork, the work that everyone can see and that other men homosocially seldom fail to notice even when sliding precariously down a gravel road in an old pickup truck. Both PFI and non-PFI men in our study often expressed fascination with heavy outdoor machinery. PFI farmers, however, also expressed reservations about the cultural implications of the “big iron” mentality, as one PFI farmer derisively called it. Instead, PFI men often described the value of a less controlling orientation to the land and to animals, and thus revealed a more dialogic approach.

*Big iron.* Ted, a PFI member who is moving away from standard corn-and-beans row-crop agriculture on his small farm, told Mike

that he has trouble talking with farmers who are mostly interested in machinery and owning thousands of acres. "I feel uncomfortable getting in with the other crowd, so to speak, because mainly what they talk about is machinery. The new this. The new that. How many acres I'm farming or . . . whatever . . . I could care less. I don't have any interest in that stuff."

Such an outlook toward machines, however, can isolate farm men from their neighbors. An important feature of PFI is that it provides social structural and cultural support for this less mechanized masculinity—a place for different kinds of conversations. In the words of Frank, another PFI member, "PFI is the one farm organization that I belong to that I really have lively interest in. . . . They aren't going big. They aren't excited by the big machinery and the big new stuff."

Yet PFI farmers are not oblivious to the monologic attractions of "going big" and enjoying more control over nature. John, a third PFI farmer, explained, "I always look forward to cultivating because it's that control thing—it's controlling nature. You get out there with your machinery, and you cut up those weeds with that machinery, and it feels good." He continued, "You see the end result immediately. When you plant, it's weeks before you see what you planted; here, it's instant gratification." Although John clearly enjoys cultivating, he is also self-conscious about "controlling nature." He admits he enjoys it, but wishes he could overcome "that control thing."

In a culture dominated by a monologic orientation, it is often difficult to maintain a dialogic perspective on being a man. A farmer who lets go of the "big iron" mentality also lets go of a well-established cultural repertoire of self-esteem—and power.

### **Husbands and Husbandry**

While big machines in Iowa monologically define masculinity, working with certain types of livestock (such as raising broilers) is monologically associated more closely with femininity, at least stereotypically. Sustainable agriculture of the type promoted by PFI, however, usually depends on incorporating these types of livestock into the farm operation, as well as on diversifying production and adding value. The "big iron" view of farming thus is culturally incompatible with the ideology of sustainability. At least this is the argument that PFI members Jim and Jerilyn (mainly Jim) made to Mike. Jim and Jerilyn, a middle-aged couple, operate a small diversified farm with several crops in addition to the usual corn and soybeans, as well as three different livestock operations.

"I think having animals around humbles a person," Jim began. "I think it humbles you because..."

"You got to go out and scoop poop," interjected Jerilyn.

"And you know sometimes they die," continued Jim. "Sometimes [even if you] do everything right, there'll be some other factor come in, like a weather change. Or something will make them sick. Where cash grain tends to be more 'blow black smoke with big power' and 'cover a wide swath.' It's more of a power trip or image of authority: 'I can do this because I've got 400 horsepower under the tractor, and I can make 60 feet black.' Or something like that. It's more of a machinery-dominating thing. Where having animals, you don't dominate them the way you dominate land. Animals are much more humbling because they're just harder—harder to control."

Jim and Jerilyn support a different masculine performance here. This masculinity is distinctive in its appreciation of the humbling lack of control caused by animals and the livestock business—a sense of control that Jim dialogically feels he does not require. (Mike observed, however, that Jim dominated this conversation, as he did most of the interview.) For the more dialogic man, animals are not necessarily a threat to masculine identity. In contrast, for the more monologic man, animals can be difficult to control; this fact may influence not only farm practices but major production decisions as well.

### **Making Decisions, Making Mistakes, Making Community**

Although male PFI farmers expressed ambivalence about giving up environmental and social control, they were more willing than non-PFI farmers to do so. PFI men display greater social openness, especially with regard to making decisions, making mistakes, and making community. We regard these forms of openness as characteristically dialogic.

To begin, farming is notoriously uncertain. As Carl, a non-PFI member who used to grow seed corn, explained to Mike, "[In] the business of farming . . . a person has to be very optimistic. You wouldn't dare get into farming if you weren't an optimist because you have everything thrown at you. The markets, which you have no control over. You got mother nature, which you have no control over. You have insects you have no control over. What the government does you have no control over. There's so many factors out there that the farmer has no control over."

This struggle to survive in farming is in part a struggle to retain one's identity as a man. Farmers who are less in control of their farm, less productive, and less successful may be considered less masculine than other farmers. One defensive response to agriculture's uncertain structures of masculine performance is to assert a rigid, oppositional, socially controlling masculinity—a strongly monologic masculinity.

Greg encountered a striking example of monologic masculine control while talking with Carl's wife, Rose. Initially Greg didn't think this conversation would take place because of Carl's gate-keeping at the first interview. The conversation started uncomfortably. "I don't know where I was when you were here last," said Rose, making excuses for not meeting Greg during his first visit.

Greg then asked questions about what turned out to be an awkward topic for Rose: decision making on the farm. When Greg asked her who makes the decisions, she replied shortly, "I leave the farm decisions up to Carl." Greg spent too much time asking about the farm, while Rose clearly wanted to explain to him that she doesn't get involved in the crops or the livestock. She finally said, "He lets me run the house." In her own words, she doesn't even have control of the household tasks; Carl *lets* her run the house, as if some day he might take this "privilege" away from her. Monologic masculinity in its most extreme patriarchal performance attempts to control everything; others must ask permission even to become part of the conversation.

PFI men also may attempt to enjoy the hierarchical satisfactions of monologic control, but in our fieldwork we were often struck by their struggle to perform a more socially open masculinity. John, a PFI farmer discussed earlier, recently participated with his family in a holistic management (HM) workshop. HM is a decision-making approach that has become very popular among PFI members and others in the sustainable agriculture movement. It provides farmers with a decision-making template that takes into account the social, economic, and environmental implications of farm practices, based on the values and goals of each family member. Collective decision making within the family, then, is central to the HM approach.

As John explained to Greg, "Well, one thing, by trying to use (HM) you realize, boy, you got to learn how to cooperate with people. That's a big part of it. Learning cooperation even within the family. Getting everybody tuned into the goals. . . . [W]e just did that two weeks ago. We made our own family goal. We sat around for two hours one Sunday night with the kids and we said, 'Well, what do we want this family to be like, and what do we want to do?'"

John's remark "even within the family" indicated his view that family cooperation is unusual. In making this observation, he was trying to redefine himself as a more dialogic man, as are many PFI men. In reality, John may have used the occasion of "learning cooperation" for "getting everybody tuned" into *his* goals; we were not able to interview other family members on this point. Our impression, however, is that he is making a concerted effort to be more open to the opinions of others and less controlling.

PFI provides an important social support structure for this more dialogic masculinity. Among the places offering this support are

PFI's "Shared Visions" community-building groups. Mike regularly visited a Shared Visions group that focused each meeting on how to improve the farm practices of a different couple in the group. The frank, friendly criticism by the group has been a particular challenge for male participants, but also a great relief. It's hard to keep up a constant facade of control, especially in difficult times where simple mistakes can cost dearly. As one middle-aged farmer, Brad, remarked at a meeting, "You feel like a fish out of water, flopping around. And this Shared Visions group helped me through that a bit."

Sharon, usually rather shy and awkward in the group, suddenly burst into the conversation. "I just want to say," she stated, looking across the room at Brad, "what you said about being a fish out of water—that was a hard thing, especially for a man, to say. That says a lot about what's good about this group. That we can say these things." By reinforcing Brad's openness to expressing his feelings to the group, she was also reinforcing dialogic masculinity and communality within the group.

An important element of admitting lack of control in farming is this dialogic approach to admitting mistakes from which others can learn. Brian, a PFI member, explained to Mike the difference he finds between PFI members and other farmers:

People will share. They're willing to talk about their successes and their failures. They like to share with people. [In other organizations] you hear about the successes, but nobody ever wants to talk about their failures. Even the neighbor down the road. You can go down there, and he might let you know about his success. . . . The simple fact [is] that he'd like to boost his ego up a little bit. But he'll never tell you about that mistake he made back on the back forty which nobody ever would see.

PFI men often described to us the importance of sharing ideas, providing emotional support, sharing labor, and other forms of community building. Non-PFI men were not silent on these topics, but most did not emphasize them as strongly as PFI men—and certainly not as strongly as Jim, who went so far as to praise social dependency as a benefit of livestock farming. With livestock, he explained, "you're more dependent on a feed dealer. You're dependent more on a veterinarian. You're dependent more on your plumber, your electrician. You're dependent more on people. You work with a lot more people in livestock production than you do in cash grain."

In these and other ways, PFI men present a more socially open masculine performance. They are not always so dialogic, nor are non-PFI men completely monologic. Yet part of what many PFI



men find attractive about their organization's structure and culture is the support it gives them to be more dialogic while remaining as masculine as the guy on the other side of the fence.

### **Back Across the Fence**

On the whole, Iowa farm families still maintain traditional gender roles and masculine identities. The transition to sustainable agriculture, however, seems to be accompanied by changes in masculinity. The oppositional character of monologic masculinity fits poorly with the social and environmental interrelations and openness to change stressed by sustainable agriculture. Men with a more dialogic conception of their masculinity appear to support and be supported by an organization such as PFI. As Giddens (1984) would put it, a "duality of structure" is at work here: the agents of dialogic agricultural masculinity are working in concert with its organizational structures.

Structures of performance, such as the uncertainties of agriculture and a lack of more groups like PFI, encourage farm men to define their masculinity in monologic ways. As Bakhtin optimistically points out, however, there is no such thing as a pure monologue. Just as there is no such thing as pure social structure, agency and cultural influences are also involved. Moreover, most of the PFI and non-PFI farm men in our study showed a dialogic side—some more than others—which suggests that cultural opportunities for social change exist even within monologic structures of performance.

We would also suggest that the struggle to survive in farming, for men, is at the same time a struggle to retain one's identity as a man. This is no less true for male sustainable farmers than for male industrial farmers. In fact, the acceptance of a less polarized masculinity may be essential to the future viability of sustainable agriculture for these men. Practical farmers need a practical identity. They need an identity with more flexible boundaries, and one that opens up agri/cultural space for other voices and other ways of farming.

The voices of women in farming are of particular sociological importance. Women's voices in PFI could still not be described as loud, although they are increasing in volume. PFI has ten elected board members and five ex officio board members; two of the elected board members are, at the time of this writing, women. The group also now hosts an annual women's weekend. Also, the growth of community supported agriculture and of interest in direct marketing, both areas with greater representation by women, has given women more prominence in the group. Outside PFI, women are playing a central role in the development of the sustainable agriculture movement at all levels: national, regional, on-

and off-farm, and in-home. Across the country, women are better represented and more prominent in sustainable agricultural organizations than in industrial agricultural organizations.

Our analysis of PFI would suggest that this is not accidental. Dialogic masculinity opens up the conversation not only between women and men, but also between men and men. In the words of one male farmer, this type of group "has brought us back across the fence." Yes . . . and no. We share this farmer's optimism, but the development of dialogic masculinity, like sustainable agriculture itself, is still in a nascent stage. Much more opening up is needed. In other words, we are still coming back across the fence—but that is definitely a leg over in the right direction.

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